



COMMUNITY

4-H & YOUTH

ENVIRONMENT

AGRICULTURE

FOOD

UNIVERSITY OF
VERMONT

EXTENSION

CULTIVATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Farm Management Team Q & A's

By Glenn Rogers, *Reginal Farm Management Specialist*

#6

(B) Author's Note: These fact sheets are a result of questions posed to me and answered in a national publication over the years.

Innovative ways to farm -- and develop?

March 2006/Revised June 2009

Last fall, I saw big new houses sitting smack in the middle of soybean fields. The houses had yards so small you could almost knock on the front door from the combine ladder. Could this be a way to preserve farms of the future? Are there other ideas like it floating around? What would be the pros and cons of such low-density housing development? How would I retain cropping rights in such a deal?

In many places throughout the Northeast farmers have found it necessary to sell roadside 5 and 10 acre building lots to raise temporary cash for their operation. Lots are often this size to meet the minimum zoning standards or to bypass certain review regulations. These lots are much larger than a farmer wants to sell and are much larger than the homeowner wants or needs. A sale of this size involves losing cropland, creates problems for the farmer to operate without obtaining permission from each landowner and creates "spaghetti" development and other farming issues. While it does reduce taxes, provides housing to the public, and generates cash for the farmer, it limits your future. Recently farmers have found that retaining the agricultural easement on all but 1/2 acres or less might be an alternative. This compromise has found favor with some homeowners who want the wide open spaces, or forestland, but not the headache of farming. There are cons to this as agricultural practices involve pesticides and large equipment which can mean some differences of opinion between the residents and the individual retaining the agricultural rights. It also involves cooperation amongst all the neighbors and the farming enterprise. Farms will remain in this type of community if they remain highly profitable, are able to integrate traffic and nearby citizenry into the farming operation, are good communicators, are flexible, and are willing to look at all sides of an issue. Eventually, the agricultural enterprises located in these areas will be retail in nature. Although presently many have continued with commodity crops, the land, house location, zoning regulations, permits and other factors might well force those holding the agricultural rights to switch to a more urban type of agricultural enterprise that garners more profit for the farmer.

Before you go this route, talk with local Land Conservation or Trust people, Extension Agents and lenders on the pros and cons on the above issues in your area.

Research has repeatedly proven that housing is costly to a town, county and state tax base. That same research has shown that agricultural and forest land provide tax benefits to the town without the infrastructure costs. Forest and ag land provides more benefits than what it (and the surrounding agricultural enterprises/housing) cost as crop and forest property do not require schooling, municipal water, plowing, etc., yet the property is taxed at some level. Unfortunately, growth is inevitable. Thus to create the least loss to ag and forest land and to maximize tax benefits it would behoove all to utilize the worst possible land for development. Although the initial cost of development may be high, the initial cost of the land is minimal and if done properly the impact on the environment can be minimal. A friend just purchased a 30% slope property and through innovation and patience built a wonderful house into the landscape while preserving the good productive forest land. The septic system is integrated into the woodland slope. In addition, he selectively cut the forest with long term foresight using a consulting forester and eco-minded logger. The property now will generate a high tax base and with no loss to ag nor productive forest land. Thinking outside of the box is essential to preserving productive ag and forest land. Clustering and integrating development into the landscape on the poorest quality land is essential to the viability of the towns, counties and the agricultural and forest enterprises.

Put any development on land you don't need for the forestry or agricultural enterprise. Be innovative, think outside the box and think down the road 20—50 years, or 100 years.